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‘Stay Calm and Carry On?’ Adventurers in the Neighborhood of Joy and Machetes

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Abstract

“Adventurers” is the nickname that “irregular” sub-Saharan migrants—in Morocco and beyond—have given to themselves. Heroic discourses surrounding migrants’ journeys and their exploits towards Fortress Europe are the antithesis of what Hage (2009) describes as “heroism of stuckedness”; that is a conservative governmentality which delegitimizes impatience and disruption in a permanent time of crisis. “Boatpeople,” “illegal migrants,” who do not “wait out” the crisis, are perceived as hordes of savages assaulting Europe. This photo-essay aims to depict migrants’ liminality and complex agency in a marginal neighborhood of Morocco, Douar Hajja. A poor and over-crowded part of Rabat, Douar Hajja is where sub-Saharan migrants’ im/mobility is grounded as a result of Europe’s externalization of border controls. It is a space in constant (re)making where migrants’ establishment is not fully realized as they wait to decide whether to stay in Morocco, go on, or return. Though legally and materially marginalized, migrants in Douar Hajja engage in socio-political activities: they organize life in collective houses, open businesses, and set up political organizations.

Keywords: Morocco; irregular migration; waiting



Figure 1

This photographic essay draws from pictures I took during the participant-observation I carried out for my doctoral fieldwork (May 2012 – August 2013) in Morocco. It explores the everyday life of “irregular” sub-Saharan migrants in the marginal neighborhood of

Douar Hajja, Rabat. Administratively known as Hay el-Farah (the neighborhood of joy), sub-Saharan migrants nicknamed it Douar Hajja (Figure 1) the “neighborhood of machetes,” on account of regular racist and violent attacks from neighbors and the policeman.



Figure 2

Migrants attempting to reach Europe irregularly are akin to the supernumerary, superfluous “human waste” (Bauman 2003). European countries and institutions portray them as a destructive horde at the borders of Europe or as an indistinct mass of victims in need of protection, albeit as far from Europe as possible (Lutterbeck 2006). The European Union’s twin-discourse of protection and security has resulted in the “ubiquity of borders” (Balibar 2004), the proliferation of “spaces of exception” (De Genova 2002), as well as the militarization and externalization of border controls (Baldwin-Edwards 2006). Activists and scholars have denounced Morocco’s role of “Gendarme of Europe” (Belguendouz 2005) for its adoption of mostly repressive migration policies (i.e. Law 02-03), police brutality in the borderlands, and lack of enforcement of migrants’ rights. As a result, migrants’ stay in Morocco has become extremely difficult, and their journeys onwards increasingly perilous.



Figure 3

My sub-Saharan informants in Douar Hajja often refused the term “migrant” and called themselves “adventurers.” As Patrick from Central Africa put it, “adventure is when you leave your country for whatever destination, with all the obstacles that you may find on the way.” Adventurers in Douar Hajja are mostly single men in their twenties from western and central Africa (especially from Cameroon, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, and Guinea). However, there is a growing visible presence of unaccompanied minors, elderly men, families with young children, and women of all ages. From diverse socio-economic backgrounds, migrants share “the same conditions,” a recurrent understatement referring to harsh life in Morocco. Estimates for the population of sub-Saharan irregular migrants in the country vary between ten-to-fifteen thousand, according to NGOs, and fifty thousand, according to the government. The basis of such estimates is dubious and problematic.



Figure 4

Collective solidarity and reciprocity were necessary. Figure 2 shows a daily collective meal in an Ivoirian house. Mutual help was indispensable to reach the “objective,” often loosely described as “to find one’s life” [chercher sa vie]. Destinations and aspirations were diverse and also changed depending on opportunities. Figure 3 shows a football poster in a room where young Cameroonians, like many others, dreamt of football glory in Europe. In adventurers were intertwined several, and sometimes conflicting, ties towards families left behind, and other adventurers who shared the same “suffering.” Figure 4 depicts a graffiti (“suffering is a school of life”) in a building occupied by Cameroonians.



Figure 5

For those heroes who seized the transnational spaces of opportunity usually reserved to the global elite, Douar Hajja was part of a complex web of places in which their im/mobility was grounded. There, migrants could find irregular (precarious and poorly paid) jobs, usually heavy lifting on construction sites, which they called “forced labor.” Figure 5 shows a group of Cameroonians doing the laundry and training with hand-made weights on a day off. There, migrants prepared “attacks,” paddling on over-loaded “zodiacs,” or climbing over the fences around the Spanish enclaves. Figure Six shows a group of Cameroonians packing handmade wooden paddles before going to the borderlands. Such endeavors were risky, as the prospect of being wounded or killed by Moroccan and Spanish forces was real (Human Rights Watch 2014). Figure 7 shows a wounded Cameroonian after a failed attempt at crossing into Melilla. Those who failed because they were too tired or had been arrested, suffered beatings from Spanish and Moroccan forces, or were deported to the Algerian desert, often came back to Douar Hajja, a rear-base where migrants would weigh their options, rest, share information, and save money before another “attempt.”



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

Douar Hajja was also a place of boredom and wait. Figure 8 shows an Ivoirian man idle in his room during another day without finding work. However, the heroism of the “adventurers” in Douar Hajja was no “heroism of stuckness” (Hage 2009). Indeed, Hage claims that the latter’s pervasiveness “heralds a celebration and organization of waiting in times of crisis. It signals a conservative governmentality that aims at de-legitimizing impatience and the desire to disrupt ‘the queue’ even in the face of disaster” (2009:7). Whilst Europe is invaded by merchandise bearing the “stay calm and carry on” motto, irregular migrants readily waiting at the doors of Europe are portrayed as an uncivilized threat. They do not wait for the crisis to pass: in their own words, they “shock” (choquent) the border, like Moroccan migrants have been burning (harrag) it before them to reach Europe.

The present pictures attempt to capture migrants’ complex agency; rather than mere “bare lives” (Agamben 1998) in a “state of exception,” sub-Saharan migrants in Douar Hajja showed resilience. Like the refugee camps described by Agier (2010), Douar Hajja was a place of possibility, being constantly reshaped by migrants’ presence, but without yet taking a definite form.



Figure 9

Businesses such as hairdressers, restaurants, and even internet cafés run by and for sub-Saharan migrants emerged, but they opened and shut as quickly as their highly im/mobile clientele and managers moved in and out. Figure 9 shows a hairdresser salon set up by Ivoirian Charly in Douar Hajja. Migrants were also self-organized in different kinds of houses, ranging from overcrowded and hierarchical “ghettoes” to two people living in a room. Politics was at the heart of Douar Hajja where two houses were aptly nicknamed *le consulat* (consulate) and *l’ambassade* (embassy). During my fieldwork, I also observed the formation and development of a *sans-papiers* organization: ALECMA (Shedding Light onto Clandestine Emigration Association), which was involved in the summer 2013 campaigns against racism and human rights infringements (Bachelet 2013). Figure 10 shows a representative from ALECMA in front of the Moroccan Parliament during a visit by French President Hollande to discuss matters which included irregular migration.



Figure 10

Following pressure from civil society (including migrants’ associations such as ALECMA), royal directives for a “radically new” politics of migration have put hopes up for sub-Saharan migrants, including their regularization. However, several documented cases of police violence (some of them leading to death) in the borderlands and uncertainties over migrants’ future in Morocco have showed the need for renewed scrutiny over the effective enforcement of human rights (Bachelet 2014). In the current context, notions such as “transit migration” and “immigration by default” are politically contentious terms. These pictures do not make claims to migrants’ destination countries, but rather, illustrate a space where decisions (continuing, staying, or returning) are in constant turmoil.

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